Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

Title [redacted]

Author [redacted]

Accession No. [redacted]

Call No. [redacted]

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

Title [redacted]

Author [redacted]

Accession No. [redacted]

Call No. [redacted]

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 52

De Quincey as Literary Critic

By

J. H. Fowler

July 1922

A copy of this pamphlet is supplied to all full members of the Association. They can obtain further copies (price 1s.) on application to the Secretary, Mr. A. V. Houghton, 4 Buckingham Gate, S.W. 1.

The following Publications have been issued by the Association, and those still in print can be purchased by members :—

1907–22.

1. Types of English Curricula in Boys' Secondary Schools. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
2. The Teaching of Shakespeare in Secondary Schools (Provisional suggestions). (Out of print.) Price 1d.
3. A Short List of Books on English Literature from the beginning to 1832, for the use of Teachers. Price 6d. (to Associate Members, 1s.).
4. Shelley's View of Poetry. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
5. English Literature in Secondary Schools. By J. H. Fowler. Price 6d.
6. The Teaching of English in Girls' Secondary Schools. By Miss G. Clement. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
7. The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
8. Types of English Curricula in Girls' Secondary Schools. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
9. Milton and Party. By O. Elton, D.Litt. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
10. Romance. By W. P. Ker, LL.D. Price 1s.
11. What still remains to be done for the Scottish Dialects. By W. Grant. Price 1s.
12. Summary of Examinations in English affecting Schools. Price 6d.
13. The Impersonal Aspect of Shakespeare's Art. By Sidney Lee, D.Litt. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
14. Early Stages in the Teaching of English. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
15. A Shakespeare Reference Library. By Sidney Lee, D.Litt. Price 1s.
16. The Bearing of English Studies upon the National Life. By C. H. Herford, Litt.D. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
17. The Teaching of English Composition. By J. H. Fowler. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
18. The Teaching of Literature in French and German Secondary Schools. By Elizabeth Lee. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
19. John Bunyan. By C. H. Firth, LL.D. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
20. The Uses of Poetry. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D. Price 1s.
21. English Literature in Schools. A list of Authors and Works for Successive Stages of Study. Price 1s.
22. Some Characteristics of Scots Literature. By J. C. Smith. Price 1s.
23. Short Bibliographies of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats. Price 1s.
24. A Discourse on Modern Sibyls. By Lady Ritchie. Price 1s.
25. The Future of English Poetry. By Edmund Gosse, C.B., LL.D. Price 1s.
26. The Teaching of English at the Universities. By Sir Stanley Leathes. With a note by W. P. Ker, LL.D. Price 1s.
27. Poetry and Contemporary Speech. By Lascelles Abercrombie. Price 1s.

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 52

De Quincey as Literary Critic

By

J. H. Fowler

July, 1922

Title [redacted]

Author [redacted]

Accession No. [redacted]

Call No. [redacted]

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

DE QUINCEY AS LITERARY CRITIC[1]

'EXTRACTS!—a pitiable method! Young people have time to read lóng books and the imagination to seize all the great things.' In these words the great Napoleon justly condemned the practice of making 'snippets' of literature the staple of education. But the criticism is often carried farther, and with less reason. We have all heard anthologies condemned again and again as superficial things. Everybody, it is said, ought to make his own anthology. An admirable counsel of perfection, which becomes every year less and less possible of fulfilment as year by year the printing presses of all the nations increase indefinitely the vast piles of books already existing in the world. Even so genuine a lover of literature as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has lately expressed some gratitude to those who burnt the great library at Alexandria and destroyed an immense amount of the accumulated rubbish of the ancient world. The real charge against them, he says, is not that they burnt, but only that they burnt indiscriminately. In other words, he does not blame them for making an anthology, or even for making it violently, but only for making it badly.

The precise cause that moved me to this reflection was the sight upon my own shelves of the fourteen volumes of the collected edition of De Quincey's works as definitively edited by the late Dr. Masson. Ought everybody who cares for English literature to possess the whole of De Quincey? I asked myself: and ought I myself to possess all the writings of every English author whom I respect? I have neither the money to buy all of them, nor the space to house them if I did possess them; so this latter question may be called a purely academic one. But the question about De Quincey seemed worth considering. Ought we all to read the whole of his writings? Certain of them I am quite sure we ought to read—the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, the *English Mail-Coach*, the *Essay on Murder as one of the Fine Arts*, the *Revolt of the Tartars*, the chapters of autobiography dealing with

[1] A paper read to the Bristol Branch of the English Association, 3rd December 1920.

his home and early years, his reminiscences of his friends, the short essay *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*, and two or three pieces of poetic prose not included in this list—these things are among the permanent classics of English literature, and they could easily be got into two or three small volumes. But what about the rest? Well, the result of my inspection, and of my re-reading of a considerable proportion, was strongly to confirm my belief in the applicability to literature of the famous maxim, *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum*—'the judgement of the world—the world of letters—is unshakable.' I might like to tell you that I had found finer things hidden away in the neglected portions of De Quincey's writings than in the works which the world has agreed to honour; it would be pleasant to feel that I had some discoveries of first-rate importance to communicate to you. But perhaps you will regard it as on the whole more comforting to yourselves, and it certainly seems to me more in accordance with the truth, if I say that the world has remembered the right things and that a great deal of the rest is of inferior quality. More than once he projects an ambitious critical dissertation which begins in a lofty vein, 'Ercles' vein', only to spread itself into an arid waste of talk where the argument is finally lost altogether, as a stream loses itself irrecoverably in the sands.

But though I bring you back a report which will hardly encourage you to spend the time I have spent myself upon De Quincey's less-known writings, let me hasten to qualify that report by two considerations. Even the third-rate work of such a man as De Quincey will at all events repay perusal better than those husks of contemporary literature with which most of us are fain to fill ourselves in bad quarters of an hour in the dentist's waiting-room, or on a journey, or before dinner. And, secondly, De Quincey at his very worst can never write many pages in succession without striking out a phrase that it is a joy to discover and remember, or recounting in inimitable fashion some humorous anecdote or some quaint experience of his own. Moreover, the volumes of selections which I have suggested as adequate for most purposes would hardly give us a sufficient idea of De Quincey's service as a critic of English literature—a service which, I think, was really important, and which I wish to emphasize because I doubt whether it is much remembered.

There is indeed one definition or distinction of his which has been widely quoted and accepted, but which, I am bound to confess, does not seem to me really profound or valuable—I mean his famous distinction between literature of *knowledge* and literature of *power*.

'There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is—to *teach*; the function of the second is—to *move*: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy. Remotely, it may travel towards an object seated in what Lord Bacon calls *dry* light; but, proximately, it does and must operate,—else it ceases to be a literature of *power*,—on and through that *humid* light which clothes itself in the mists and glittering *iris* of human passions, desires, and genial emotions. . . .

The very highest work that has ever existed in the literature of knowledge is but a *provisional* work: a book upon trial and sufferance and *quamdiu bene se gesserit*. Let its teaching be even partially revised, let it be but expanded—nay, even let its teaching be but placed in a better order—and instantly it is superseded. Whereas the feeblest works in the literature of Power, surviving at all, survive as finished and unalterable amongst men.'[1]

Now I question whether the distinction here drawn is a very sound or helpful one. There is, of course, a very vital distinction—the distinction drawn by Charles Lamb—between real books and books that are only books in name or in outward appearance, *Biblia A-biblia*. Once or twice De Quincey uses a phrase which seems to imply that this is the distinction which he himself is drawing. He speaks with some contempt of books that have the purpose of giving information, books whose abstract is an encyclopaedia, that serve their purpose and go out of date like an encyclopaedia. But there are other phrases that imply that he has something else in mind. He says, for instance, that no man could class Blue-books as literature, though, 'as an immense depository of faithful, and not superannuated, statistics, they are indispensable to the honest student.' But he would include in literature, I presume, everything that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch includes in it in the following sentence from his recent lectures on 'The Art of Reading':

'Man's loss of Paradise has been a subject of English Literature, and so has been a Copper Coinage in Ireland, and so has been Roast Sucking-pig, and so has been Holy Dying, and so has been Mr. Pepys's somewhat unholy living, and so have been Ecclesiastical Polity, The Grail, Angling for Chub, The Wealth of Nations, The Sublime and the Beautiful, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Prize-Fights, Grecian Urns, Modern Painters, Intimations of Immortality in Early Childhood, Travels with a Donkey, Rural Rides and Rejected Addresses—*all* these have been subjects of English Literature: as have been human complots and intrigues

[1] *De Quincey's Collected Writings*, ed. D. Masson, 1897, xi, pp. 54–7.

as wide asunder as *Othello* and *The School for Scandal*; persons as different as Prometheus and Dr. Johnson, Imogen and Moll Flanders, Piers the Plowman and Mr. Pickwick; places as different as Utopia and Cranford, Laputa and Reading Gaol. *Epipsychidion* is literature: but so is *A Tale of a Tub*.'

What precisely does De Quincey mean, then, by dividing what he admits to be literature into these two classes, literature of knowledge and literature of power, and exalting the latter at the expense of the former? For my part, I believe the distinction to be a false one. I think De Quincey's position would have been far more defensible if he had refused the name of literature altogether to that which merely gave information and asserted that the only literature properly so called was the literature of power. 'Literature of knowledge'—this, in De Quincey's sense of the word 'knowledge', expresses what is merely an accident. 'Power,' on the other hand—the word expresses what is characteristic of every item on that highly miscellaneous list which I read to you from Sir A. Quiller-Couch.

But the distinction drawn by De Quincey seems to me not only irrelevant but positively harmful. De Quincey allows himself, in more than one place, some foolish sneers at Plato. If he had studied that philosopher with a little more care he would have learnt from him one of the most valuable distinctions ever drawn by and for the human intellect—the distinction between ἐπιστήμη and δόξα—between Knowledge, Know-ledge, Science in the best and highest use of the word, and Opinion or the fleeting unverified Impressions of Sense. Knowledge in this use expresses a great ideal, and when a word has once achieved such a meaning it is like a piece of solid rock 'won from the void and formless infinite', and we do wrong to let it be defaced or soiled by any ignoble uses. We may say in partial defence of De Quincey that it was not he who had degraded the word. I do not know whether it was Bacon who originated the expression, 'Knowledge is Power': he certainly gave it currency—*Scientia est Potestas*. No doubt De Quincey was irritated by hearing it used, as it often was used in the nineteenth century, merely in the sense: 'Information is power—the man who has been instructed, acquired information, has at his command the means to wealth and success in life.' It is a sorry doctrine, and we need not wonder that De Quincey's gall rose at it. He wanted, I take it, to protest that to value literature for the information it gave was to degrade it; the real power of literature was the power to move the hearts of men. But much as I sympathize with him, I feel that he was led on to a wrong track, induced to make a false

and a dangerous distinction. Surely it would have been better to say: 'Knowledge *is* Power, but Knowledge does not mean what you think, and Power does not mean what you think either. The true meaning of *Knowledge is Power* is this: He who really knows things, who has mastered some little fragment of knowledge, who knows what he knows and how little he knows and how much he does not know, has won power; the power to make something of his life. He has escaped from the slavery of prejudices and conventions and impressions in which the mass of men are content to live.' Do you remember the lines which Henry Sidgwick dreamt? (They are not as beautiful as 'Kubla Khan', but then he was not a poet.)

> We think so, because other people all think so,
> Or because—or because after all we do think so,
> Or because we were told so, and think we must think so,
> Or because we once thought so, and think we still think so,
> Or because having thought so, we think we *will* think so.

Just in so far as it delivers us from this bondage of the mind, *Knowledge is Power.*

But to come back to literature: what shall we say is the true connexion between literature and power? May we not say that what really moves us is *style*? *Style is Power*, and it is style that makes literature. For what we mean by style is the perfect adaptation of form to matter, adequate and satisfactory expression. Try all the items in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's highly miscellaneous catalogue, and see if this is not true of all of them. To take an even more extreme instance than any upon that list, we should hardly venture to deny the name of literature even to *Euclid's Elements* in view of the perfect adaptation of means to ends: Euclid has the supreme virtues of style, sincerity, and (yes, I will venture to say it, in spite of the multitudes who have found some difficulty in getting safely across the Pons Asinorum) lucidity, and you cannot have sincerity and lucidity without gaining in some degree the third virtue of style, which is beauty, though the beauty of Euclid is of a somewhat austere kind, 'bald as the bare mountain-tops are bald,' as Arnold said of some of Wordsworth's lines. In all good literatures matter and form are so absolutely united that they can only be separated by an effort of abstraction. But in the case of certain kinds of literature, of all that prose which is written mainly for some utility, whether of a higher or of a lower kind, we tend to think chiefly of the matter, though we can find an aesthetic pleasure in contemplating the perfect adaptation of means to end. In the case of other kinds—and perhaps we may

say in proportion as prose draws near to the confines of poetry—our interest in the form, the manner of saying, becomes even greater than our interest in the matter, the thing said. This was the aspect of literature that most deeply interested De Quincey all his life. He has told us how deeply he was impressed in childhood by that sentence in the Authorized Version of the Book of Daniel: 'Belshazzar the King made a great feast to a thousand of his lords'—a sentence which he compares to 'the crashing overture' of an oratorio. It might possibly be argued that he was over-sensitive to these subtle effects of rhythm and the associations of sounds and words. Perhaps in his own prose-writing he tended to set too much store by such things to the neglect of other more commonplace but more valuable qualities of good prose. But to urge this would be ungrateful. For his special, his most characteristic, literary triumphs were largely won in that borderland where prose almost passes into poetry. It is a dangerous borderland, strewn with the wrecks of many brave practitioners of the purple patch; but the more numerous the failures in this kind, the more readily ought we to allow the merit of De Quincey's achievements in a peculiarly difficult art. It is an art that is out of favour at present. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is something like the making of puns—an art that everybody professes to despise and yet almost everybody has a weakness for.

But it is high time that I passed to De Quincey's positive contributions to English literary criticism. And first I must mention what you all doubtless are familiar with already—the contribution which every editor would include in the suggested small volumes of selections—the paper *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*. I shall never forget the impression which it made on me when I first read it as a boy of sixteen. For those were the days when Shakespearian criticism in school did not often, at least in my experience, stray far outside the notes of a school edition. What a wonderful contrast to those laborious comments, line upon line, pedantry upon pedantry, as one is tempted to say, though that is unfair to the learned editors, was this illuminating essay with its attempt to gauge the significance of a scene, an episode of the drama! To gauge the significance—no, that is not the word—for the value of this criticism was rather that it suggested unfathomable depths in a wide ocean of genius—a sea on which we could set sail in our own tiny barques of criticism and plunge in the net, confident that we should draw up some spoil worth the having though we should never exhaust the riches of the unharvested deep.

'If the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis, on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully in the silence and desertion of the streets, and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man—if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting, as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible by reaction.

'Now apply this to the case in *Macbeth*. Here the retiring of the human heart, and the entrance of the fiendish heart, was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stept in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed"; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.'[1]

Had there been anything quite like this criticism in English literature before? Look at that admirable collection of Shakespearian criticisms in a volume of the 'World's Classics', and judge. I think you will agree that this criticism of De Quincey's is something new and significant. It is also highly characteristic. All through life De Quincey seems to have been haunted by a sense of swift and sudden transitions, like that from the peace of summer night upon

[1] *Collected Writings*, x, pp. 392–3.

the northern road to the sharp agony of the collision between the mail-coach and the light two-wheeled gig, and by a sense of the mysterious solemnity of words or sounds charged with significance in the sequel, as in the example I have already quoted from the Book of Daniel. Both these feelings play a large part in the *Note on the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*, so that we should not be justified in concluding from the subtlety of this note that, if De Quincey had turned his attention more deliberately and systematically to Shakespeare, he could have given us criticism as valuable and enlightening as that which we owe to his contemporaries, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Charles Lamb. I am far from thinking so: he had not the range of sympathetic insight which makes the three men I have named such splendidly qualified interpreters. This particular criticism, in my view, was one which we owe to De Quincey's special idiosyncrasies. We must not base too much upon it in our estimate of De Quincey's powers, but we ought to remember with gratitude that it makes a departure and sets an example. It must have inspired many readers, and it will continue to do so for generations to come.

As I read the passage just now, the great national ceremony of Armistice Day 1920 must have come into your minds. If it should prove that it was some reminiscence, conscious or unconscious, of this passage that had suggested to those who planned that ceremony the most impressive of all its features, it would be a wonderful triumph, would it not? for a writer of prose. But I will make bold to say that, if there was no reminiscence of De Quincey, his triumph was hardly less. For in that case we may apply to him what he said of the 'elaborate and pompous sunset' he saw hanging over the mountains of Wales on his famous walk from Manchester to Chester. The clouds passed through several arrangements, he tells us, and the last of them was a Canadian lake,

> With all its fairy crowds
> Of islands that together lie
> As quietly as spots of sky
> Amongst the evening clouds.

'The scene', he continues, 'that had been originally mimicked by the poet from the sky, was here re-mimicked and rehearsed to the life, as it seemed, by the sky from the poet.'[1]

Next in importance to this new departure in Shakespearian criticism I put De Quincey's early recognition of the genius of

[1] *Collected Writings*, iii, p. 302.

Wordsworth. On this let us hear what he himself has to say. Immediately after the quotation which I have just read you, he proceeds: 'Was I then, in July 1802, really quoting from Wordsworth? Yes, reader; and I only in all Europe.' I confess that I have long suspected De Quincey of some exaggeration, though probably unintentional exaggeration, in this matter. He has the not altogether singular tendency to view himself as the centre of any subject he has under contemplation. In *The Vision of Sudden Death*, for example, the central point of the tragedy is De Quincey's personal inability to rouse himself to avert the catastrophe. So he cannot view the question of Wordsworth's recognition by the world objectively; he must place himself at the central point in the situation. In this manner of approaching literary criticism De Quincey has many descendants at the present day. The manner has indeed become conscious of itself and pleased with itself: we have critics who seriously maintain that the sole business of criticism is to put before us a personal impression, a personal point of view. My suspicion that De Quincey had somewhat exaggerated his own distinction as Wordsworth's one appreciative reader was amusingly confirmed quite lately when I discovered that he was accustomed to 'conceit himself' (his own phrase) that he had been the only purchaser of the first edition of Landor's *Gebir*, and that Landor had denied the authenticity of De Quincey's claim. In both cases the boast showed a culpable indifference to the feelings of the poet patronized, and one can hardly be surprised if neither Wordsworth nor Landor cherished any warm gratitude to De Quincey for his discernment. Still the fact remains that De Quincey *did* discern the greatness both of Wordsworth and of Landor from the very first. It is to his credit that he not only admired Wordsworth when as yet very few shared his feeling, but that he admired Wordsworth for the right things.

Let me illustrate this by a few examples. He is just as sound as Coleridge, though not so exhaustive, in his criticism of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction, which was, he says, an obstacle purely self-created to the favourable reception of the new poetry. He points out[1] how largely in what he rightly calls the 'exquisite' poem of *Laodamia*, in the Sonnets, and in *The Excursion* Wordsworth's diction is at variance with his theory: it is not 'the idiomatic language of life as distinguished from books'. There is nothing better even in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* than the 'very troublesome dilemma' to which De Quincey reduces Wordsworth:

[1] *Collected Writings*, xi, p. 296.

'Spenser, Shakspere, the Bible of 1611, and Milton—how say you, William Wordsworth—are these sound and true as to diction, or are they not? If you say they *are*, then what is it that you are proposing to change? What room for a revolution? Would you, as Sancho says, have "better bread than is made of wheat"? But if you say *No*, they are *not* sound, then, indeed, you open a fearful range to your own artillery, but in a war greater than you could, by possibility, have contemplated. In the first case,—that is, if the leading classics of the English literature are, in quality of diction and style, loyal to the canons of sound taste,—then you cut away the *locus standi* for yourself as a reformer: the reformation applies only to secondary and recent abuses. In the second case, if they also are faulty, you undertake an *onus* of hostility so vast that you will be found fighting against stars.'[1]

Admirable, again, is this criticism of *The Excursion*:

'In the very scheme and movement of *The Excursion* there are two defects which interfere greatly with its power to act upon the mind with any vital effect of unity,—so that, infallibly, it will be read by future generations in parts and fragments; and, being thus virtually dismembered into many small poems, it will scarcely justify men in allowing it the rank of a long one. One of these defects is the *undulatory* character of the course pursued by the poem,—which does not ascend uniformly, or even keep one steady level, but trespasses, as if by forgetfulness or chance, into topics yielding a very humble inspiration, and not always closely connected with the presiding theme. . . . A second defect lies in the colloquial form which the poem sometimes assumes. It is dangerous to conduct a philosophic discussion by *talking*. If the nature of the argument could be supposed to roll through logical quillets or metaphysical conundrums, so that, on putting forward a problem, the interlocutor could bring matters to a crisis by saying "Do you give it up?" in that case there might be a smart reciprocation of dialogue, of asserting and denying, giving and taking, butting, rebutting, and "surrebutting"; and this would confer an interlocutory or amoebean character upon the process of altercation. But, the topics and the quality of the arguments being *moral*,—in which always the reconciliation of the feelings is to be secured by gradual persuasion, rather than the understanding to be floored by a solitary blow,—inevitably it becomes impossible that anything of this brilliant conversational sword-play, cut-and-thrust, carte and tierce, can make for itself an opening. Mere decorum requires that the speakers should be prosy.'[2]

Where, then, does De Quincey find the special excellences of Wordsworth? Precisely, I think, where later criticism finds them. For it must be remembered that De Quincey wrote before the publication of *The Prelude*, that poem which occupies a unique place in the affections of lovers of poetry as an autobiography of a

[1] *Collected Writings*, xi, p. 299.

[2] Ibid., xi, pp. 313–14.

poet's mind; but Wordsworth's fame was won independently of this poem, and his service to English poetry still lies mainly apart from it. Well, De Quincey's special claim for Wordsworth is that 'he has brought many a truth into life, both for the eye and the understanding, which previously had slumbered indistinctly for all men'. He gives several illustrations of this. It may be enough to mention one—Wordsworth's description of a cataract as 'frozen by distance'. 'In all nature', writes De Quincey, 'there is not an object so essentially at war with the stiffening of frost as the headlong and desperate life of a cataract; and yet notoriously the effect of distance is to lock up this frenzy of motion into the most petrific column of stillness. This effect is perceived at once when pointed out; but how few are the eyes that ever *would* have perceived it for themselves!'

Beyond these things De Quincey finds the great distinction of Wordsworth in 'the extent of his sympathy with what is really permanent in human feelings, and also the depth of this sympathy'. He ends his essay on Wordsworth's poetry with this striking sentence, which may recall to you the sentence with which Arnold ended his introductory essay to Ward's *English Poets*:

'Meditative poetry is perhaps that province of literature which will ultimately maintain most power amongst the generations which are coming; but in this department, at least, there is little competition to be apprehended by Wordsworth from any thing that has appeared since the death of Shakspere.' [1]

Thirdly, it is right to acknowledge De Quincey's early recognition of Landor, especially of Landor's poetry. He praises *Gebir* finely for 'the picturesqueness of the images, attitudes, groups, disposed everywhere', and *Count Julian* for 'passages which, for their luxury of loveliness, should be inscribed on the phylacteries of brides'. In the latter poem he proposes an emendation which has excited the admiration of Sir Sidney Colvin. The passage is this:

> Wakeful he sits, and lonely, and unmoved,
> Beyond the arrows, shouts, and views of men;
> As oftentimes an eagle, ere the sun
> Throws o'er the varying earth his early ray,
> Stands solitary, stands immovable
> Upon some highest cliff, and rolls his eye,
> Clear, constant, unobservant, unabased,
> In the cold light above the dews of morn.

De Quincey thought that if the line, 'Beyond the arrows, shouts, and views of men', were transferred to the secondary object, the

[1] *Collected Writings*, xi. p. 322.

eagle, and placed after what is now the last line, it would give 'a fuller rhythmus to the close of the entire passage'; and he pointed out that it would be 'more literally applicable to the majestic and solitary bird than to the majestic and solitary man'.[1]

This happy emendation may lead us naturally to a fourth service rendered by De Quincey to English literature—an appreciation of Milton, juster than that of any who had preceded him, except perhaps Cowper. He understood and described better than any earlier critic the superb paragraph-structure of Milton's blank verse. I may illustrate this by his comment on the opening of *Paradise Lost*—

> That to the height of this great argument
> I may assert eternal Providence.

'Hear what a motion, what a tumult, is given by the dactylic close to each of these introductory lines! And how massily is the whole locked up into the peace of heaven, as the aërial arch of a viaduct is locked up into tranquil stability by its keystone, through this deep spondaic close,

> And justify the ways of God to man.'[2]

Again we may note how his habitual sense of solitude helps his insight into a feature of Milton. Answering a charge of pedantry brought against Milton by both Addison and Johnson for introducing images and words from architecture into the simplicity of Paradise or the wilderness, he points out that the incongruity is necessary to the effect that the poet intends.

'The shadowy exhibition of a regal banquet in the desert draws out and stimulates the sense of its utter solitude and remotion from men or cities. The images of architectural splendour suddenly raised in the very centre of Paradise, as vanishing shows by the wand of a magician, bring into powerful relief the depth of silence and the unpopulous solitude which possess this sanctuary of man whilst yet happy and innocent. Paradise could not in any other way, or by any artifice less profound, have been made to give up its essential and differential characteristics in a form palpable to the imagination. As a place of rest, it was necessary that it should be placed in close collision with the unresting strife of cities: as a place of solitude, with the image of tumultuous crowds; as the centre of mere material beauty in its gorgeous prime, with the images of elaborate architecture and of human workmanship; as a place of perfect innocence in seclusion, that it should be exhibited as the antagonist pole to the sin and misery of social man.'[3]

Among other English writers to whom De Quincey did full and

[1] *Writings*, xi, p. 433. [2] Ibid., p. 456. [3] Ibid., x, p. 403–4.

notable justice are Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor. Both of these had a great influence upon his own style. Another of our classics whom he praised both generously and judiciously is Burke. Nothing could be better than the contrast which he draws between Burke and Junius: 'Burke, who exalted the merest personal themes into the dignity of philosophic speculations, and Junius, in whose hands the very loftiest dwindled into questions of person and party.'[1]

On the other side we have to admit that there were limits to his powers of appreciation. He did not do justice to Hazlitt; he did not understand Shelley; and though he was certainly not 'Blind to Galileo on his turret'—witness his magnificent paraphrase of Richter's dream of the Universe—he was 'dumb to Keats—him even!' And what of Charles Lamb? Strangely enough, De Quincey made a prophecy about him that would have been far more appropriate to Landor—that he would always be the favourite of a few, but unpopular with the many. Yet he loved Lamb for himself: and there is one passage in his reminiscences of his friend so beautiful that I cannot forbear to quote it, for it sheds the light of poetry on the most prosaic of infirmities.

'Over Lamb at this period of his life there passed regularly, after taking wine, a brief eclipse of sleep. It descended upon him as softly as a shadow. In a gross person, laden with superfluous flesh and sleeping heavily, this would have been disagreeable; but in Lamb, thin even to meagreness, spare and wiry as an Arab of the desert, or as Thomas Aquinas wasted by scholastic vigils, the affection of sleep seemed rather a network of aërial gossamer than of earthly cobweb—more like a golden haze falling upon him gently from the heavens than a cloud exhaling upwards from the flesh. Motionless in his chair as a bust, breathing so gently as scarcely to seem certainly alive, he presented the image of repose midway between life and death, like the repose of sculpture; and, to one who knew his history, a repose affectingly contrasting with the calamities and internal storms of his life.'[2]

I should like, before I conclude, to give you a few illustrations of De Quincey's own characteristic qualities from the less familiar parts of his writings. Even in the least admirable parts one seldom reads far, as I have said, without coming across some humorous story told in his inimitable fashion, or some striking phrase or image. I will quote two of the stories.

Girding at Plato for casting his philosophy into the dialogue form, he surmises, rather ungenerously, that Plato's object was to win additional applause when it should be discovered that he had himself composed all the brilliant remarks of all the interlocutors,

[1] *Writings*, x, p. 120. [2] Ibid., v, p. 252.

'as Handel (who, in consideration of his own preternatural appetite, had ordered dinner for six) said to the astonished waiter when pleading, as his excuse for not bringing up the dishes that he waited for the company,—"Young man, *I* am de gombany".'

The second story is apropos of the concluding lines of Dryden's hexastich on Milton—

> The force of Nature could no farther go:
> To make a third she joined the other two.

'In the kind of expectation raised, and in the extreme difficulty of adequately meeting this expectation, there was pretty much the same challenge offered to Dryden as was offered somewhere about the same time to a British ambassador when dining with his political antagonists. One of these—the ambassador of France—had proposed to drink his master, Louis XIV, under the character of the sun, who dispensed life and light to the whole political system. To this there was no objection; and immediately, by way of intercepting any further draughts upon the rest of the solar system, the Dutch ambassador rose and proposed the health of their high mightinesses the Seven United States, as the moon and six planets, who gave light in the absence of the sun. The two foreign ambassadors, Monsieur and Mynheer, secretly enjoyed the mortification of their English brother, who seemed to be thus left in a state of bankruptcy,—"no funds" being available for retaliation, or so they fancied. But suddenly our British representative toasted *his* master as Joshua, the son of Nun, that made the sun and moon stand still. All had seemed lost for England, when in an instant of time both her antagonists were checkmated.' [1]

I must quote, too, his delicious comment upon the audacious proposal of a certain Mr. Pinkerton for improving the English language. Mr. Pinkerton (whose pamphlet was published in 1785) was of opinion that the English language, though magnificent in range, was lacking in melody, and accordingly he proposed that every one should add at discretion the sonorous Italian terminations *a* and *o*, *ano* and *ino*, to English words. Think, he said, of the bald monosyllables with which Addison begins his admired *Vision of Mirza*: 'As I sat on the top of a rock'. (Addison, by the way, wrote nothing of the kind: either Pinkerton or De Quincey is quoting inaccurately.) How greatly would the sentence be improved, did it run, 'As I satto on the topino of a rocko'. De Quincey's comment is as follows: 'Luckilissime this proposalio of the absurdissimo Pinkertonio was not adoptado by anybodyini whateverano.'

My final quotation shall be an example of the De Quincey who is known to you all, the experimenter in a new mode of 'impassioned

[1] *Writings*, x, p. 422.

prose' or prose-poetry, the practitioner of the purple patch, but I think it may be unfamiliar, because I have chosen it from an essay that is not often read. He has been speaking of the audience which Herodotus addressed, 'the public of universal Hellas, an august congress representing the total civilization of the earth'; and he goes on:

'There was such a collective body, dimly recognized at times by the ancients, as corresponds to our modern Christendom, and having some unity of possible interest by comparison with the unknown regions of Scythias, Indias, and Ethiopias, lying in a far wider circle beyond—regions that, from their very obscurity and from the utter darkness of their exterior relations, must at times have been looked to with eyes of anxiety as permanently harbouring that possible deluge of savage eruption which, about one hundred and fifty years after, did actually swallow up the Grecian colony of Bactria (or Bokhara), as founded by Alexander; swallowed it so suddenly and so effectually that merely the blank fact of its tragical catastrophe has reached posterity. It was surprised probably in one night, like Pompeii by Vesuvius, or like the planet itself by Noah's flood; or more nearly its fate resembled those starry bodies which have been seen, traced, recorded, fixed in longitude and latitude for generations, and then suddenly are observed to be *missing* by some of our wandering telescopes that keep watch and ward over the starry heavens. The agonies of a perishing world have been going on, but all is bright and silent in the heavenly host. Infinite space has swallowed up the infinite agonies. Perhaps the only record of Bactria was the sullen report of some courier from Susa, who would come back with his letters undelivered, simply reporting that, on reaching such a ferry on some nameless river, or such an outpost upon a heath, he found it in possession of a fierce, unknown race, the ancestors of future Affghans or Tartars.'[1]

In the field of morals we are accustomed to say that the influence of what a man says or does is less than the influence of what he is. May we not with some truth apply this doctrine to literature, and say that the importance of De Quincey in the history of English literary criticism, after all, does not lie so much in the direct contributions which he made to the body of criticism, in principles which he enunciated, or in verdicts which he delivered, as in his own temper and attitude, what he was himself as a man of letters? And I think, whatever were his faults and shortcomings, his lapses into verbosity and triviality and facetiousness and egotism, we shall all agree that he set us the example of caring profoundly for the best things in literature. He never praises what is unworthy of

[1] *Writings*, x, p. 176.

praise. With all his liking for the purple patch—the *purpureus late qui splendeat pannus*—he never tolerated the merely glaring. He worshipped the great, the majestic, the really 'heart-shaking'; and in his own prose gorgeous Tragedy in sceptred pall comes sweeping by. But he loved the shy and delicate beauties of literature not less than the lines or phrases that take the eye and have their price. Even a professed lover of Wordsworth might be forgiven for being unable to place at once the line which was De Quincey's favourite in all English poetry; for it comes in one of the seldom-read *Poems on the Naming of Places*. It is that in which Wordsworth likens the *Osmunda regalis* in its retired abode to

> lady of the lake
> Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance.

To propose to award the prize for supreme beauty to any single line or image is as futile as it is tempting. We should all choose differently. Mr. Mallock, in his *New Republic*, chose, or made Ruskin choose, a line from one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

> Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

I think I should cast my own vote for

> O Proserpina,
> For the flowers now that frighted thou let'st fall
> From Dis's wagon.

But if the line which De Quincey extolled be not, as he averred, 'the most exquisite that the poetry of earth can show',[1] we may well set it beside the two lines so often quoted from Keats's *Nightingale Ode* as the perfection of romantic poetry. Such were the fine things that De Quincey loved; and because he loved them, his own writings at their best carry us with him into the high, rarefied, and bracing air of

> Great thoughts, grave thoughts, thoughts lasting to the end.

[1] *Writings*, xi, p. 370. 'Lake' was the original reading in Wordsworth's poem, though afterwards altered to 'mere'.

Title [redacted]

Author [redacted]

Accession No. [redacted]

Call No. [redacted]

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

Title

Author

Accession No.

Call No.

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date

28. The Poet and the Artist, and what they can do for us. By G. C. Moore Smith, Litt.D. Price 1s.
29. Bibliographies of Swinburne, Morris, and Rossetti. By C. E. Vaughan. Price 1s.
30. Wordsworth's Patriotic Poems and their Significance To-day. By F. S. Boas, LL.D. Price 1s.
31. The Use of Comic Episodes in Tragedy. By W. H. Hadow. Price 1s.
32. On Concentration and Suggestion in Poetry. By Sir Sidney Colvin, D.Litt. Price 1s.
33. School Libraries. By J. H. Fowler. Price 1s.
34. Poetry and the Child. By J. Dover Wilson. Price 1s.
35. The Eighteenth Century. By W. P. Ker, LL.D. Price 1s.
36. Poetry in the Light of War. By C. F. E. Spurgeon. Price 1s.
37. English Papers in Examinations for Pupils of School Age in England and Wales. Price 1s.
38. War and English Poetry. By the Most Hon. the Marquess of Crewe, K.G. Price 1s.
39. The Reaction against Tennyson. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D. Price 1s.
40. The Study of Poetry. By E. de Sélincourt, D.Litt. Price 1s.
41. The Perspective of Biography. By Sir Sidney Lee. Price 1s.
42. Some Remarks on Translation and Translators. By J. S. Phillimore. Price 1s.
43. The Teaching of English in Schools. Price 1s.
44. Sir Henry Wotton, with some General Reflections on Style in English Poetry. By the Right Hon. H. H. Asquith. Price 1s.
45. The Greek Strain in English Literature. By John Burnet, F.B.A. Price 1s.
46. A Reference Library: English Language and Literature. Price 1s.
47. The Normality of Shakespeare illustrated in his Treatment of Love and Marriage. By C. H. Herford, Litt.D. Price 1s.
48. Don Quixote. Some War-time Reflections on its Character and Influence. By H. J. C. Grierson, LL.D. Price 1s.
49. A Note on the Teaching of 'English Language and Literature', with some Suggestions. By R. B. McKerrow, Litt.D. Price 1s.
50. The Light Reading of our Ancestors. By the Right Hon. Lord Ernle, M.V.O. Price 1s.
51. Sir Thomas Malory. By E. K. Chambers, C.B. Price 1s.
52. De Quincey as Literary Critic. By J. H. Fowler. Price 1s.
53. The Teaching of English in the Universities of England. By R. W. Chambers, D.Litt. With a Note in Comment by John Bailey. Price 1s.
54. The Continuity of Literature. By Edmund Gosse, C.B., LL.D. Price 1s.
55. Some Thoughts about Verse By T. S. Omond. Price 1s.

Members can obtain further copies of the *Bulletin* (price 6d.) on application to the Secretary.

Any member having copies to spare of Pamphlets Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 13, and 17 is requested to communicate with the Secretary.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. I. Collected by A. C. Bradley. Clarendon Press. 3s. to members.

Contents:—English Place-names, by Henry Bradley; On the Present State of English Pronunciation, by Robert Bridges; Browning, by W. P. Ker; Blind Harry's 'Wallace', by George Neilson; Shakespeare and the Grand Style, by George Saintsbury; Some Suggestions about Bad Poetry, by Edith Sichel; Carlyle and his German Masters, by C. E. Vaughan.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. II. Collected by Dr. Beeching. Clarendon Press. 3s. to members.

Contents:—The Particle *ing* in Place-Names, by H. Alexander; On the Nature of the Grand Style, by John Bailey; Richardson's Novels and their Influences, by F. S. Boas; Jane Austen, by A. C. Bradley; Description in Poetry, by A. Clutton-Brock; The Literary Play, by C. E. Montague; A Yorkshire Folk-Play and its Analogues, by F. Moorman.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. III. Collected by W. P. Ker. Clarendon Press. 3s. to members.

Contents:—What English Poetry may still learn from Greek, by Gilbert Murray; Some Childish Things, by A. A. Jack; *A Lover's Complaint*, by J. W. Mackail; Arnold and Homer, by T. S. Omond; Keats's Epithets, by David Watson Rannie; Dante and the Grand Style, by George Saintsbury; Blake's Religious Lyrics, by H. C. Beeching.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. IV. Collected by C. H. Herford. Clarendon Press. 3s. to members.

Contents:—A Note on Dramatic Criticism, by J. E. Spingarn; English Prose Numbers, by O. Elton; Some Unconsidered Elements in English Place-names, by A. Mawer; Platonism in Shelley, by L. Winstanley; Defoe's *True-born Englishman*, by A. C. Guthkelch; The Plays of Mr. John Galsworthy, by A. R. Skemp; Dramatic Technique in Marlowe, by G. P. Baker.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. V. Collected by Oliver Elton. Clarendon Press. 3s. to members.

Contents:—Rhythm in English Verse, Prose, and Speech, by D. S. MacColl; The Novels of Mark Rutherford, by A. E. Taylor; English Place-names and Teutonic Sagas, by F. W. Moorman; Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, by F. Melian Stawell; Emily Brontë, by J. C. Smith; Translation from Old into Modern English, by A. Blyth Webster.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. VI. Collected by A. C. Bradley. Clarendon Press. 3s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—The 'Cædmonian' Genesis, by Henry Bradley; The Humanist Ideal, by W. P. Ker; Trollope Revisited, by George Saintsbury; On Playing the Sedulous Ape, by George Sampson; Conrad, by F. Melian Stawell; South-Eastern and South-East Midland Dialects, by H. C. Wyld.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. VII. Collected by John Bailey. Clarendon Press. 3s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—Rhyme in English Poetry, by B. de Sélincourt; Words and Music in Song, by A. H. Fox Strangways; Thomas Parnell; or, What was wrong with the Eighteenth Century, by A. H. Cruickshank; A Contemporary Light upon John Donne, by John Sampson; A Bundle of Ballads, by Geo. Neilson; The 1604 Text of Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus', by Percy Simpson.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Vol. VIII. Collected by G. C. Moore Smith. Clarendon Press. 3s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—Tragedy, by J. S. Smart; The Felon Sew, by George H. Cowling; On the Meanings of Certain Terms in the Anglo-Saxon Charters, by G. B. Grundy; Mysticism in English Poetry, by A. Hamilton Thompson; Romanticism in the Modern World, by C. H. Herford; Hazlitt, by W. P. Ker; English Grammar and Grammars, by R. B. McKerrow.

Poems of To-day. An Anthology. Published for the English Association by Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd. Price (stiff paper) 2s.; (cloth) with biographical notes, 3s. 6d.

Poems of To-day. An Anthology. 2nd Series. Published for the English Association by Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd. Price (stiff paper) 2s.; (cloth) with biographical notes, 3s. 6d.

The Essentials of English Teaching. Published for the English Association by Longmans, Green & Co. Price 6d. to members; postage 1d.

The Year's Work in English Studies, 1919–20. Vol. I. Edited by Sir Sidney Lee. Clarendon Press. 3s. 6d. to members.

The Year's Work in English Studies, 1920–21. Vol. II. Edited by Sir Sidney Lee and Dr. F. J. Boas. Clarendon Press. 3s. 6d. to members.

PRINTED IN ENGLAND AT THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Title [redacted]

Author [redacted]

Accession No. [redacted]

Call No. [redacted]

Borrower's No.	Issue Date	Borrower's No.	Issue Date